

South Devon in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 – 3 February 2019



Red-breasted Merganser



Water Rail



Siskin



Greenshank and Redshank

Report & images compiled by Matt Collis



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Matt Collis (Leader) with five Naturetrek clients

Summary

This winter break in South Devon focussed on the abundant birdlife of the internationally important Exe Estuary and its various wetland-type habitats which provide a winter home for some 30,000 waterfowl and waders. We also took the time to explore some of the surrounding habitats to be found close by, including the lowland heaths of East Devon and coastal farmland around the neighbouring River Teign.

We encountered a wonderful 95 species of birds and were fortunate to enjoy glorious sunny weather throughout. Some of the trip highlights included connecting with a great range of winter waders such as Avocet, Lapwing, Common Snipe, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Knot, Sanderling and both Black and Bar-tailed Godwits to name a few. Ducks were also another common feature of this trip with the majority of both common and scarcer species seen including Wigeon, Tufted, Pintail, Pochard, Gadwall, Shoveler, Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser. We also enjoyed intimate views of a flock of the nationally rare Cirl Bunting and had several close encounters with elusive species such as Kingfisher, Water Rail, Water Pipit, Cattle Egret and Slavonian Grebe.

Day 1

Friday 1st February

Despite the overnight snow, which had caused much disruption to the Southwest and beyond, everyone had successfully made their way to Exeter St David's Station for 1:00pm where tour leader Matt was ready and waiting. After a brief meet and greet, it was into the bus and off towards the beautiful coastal town of Exmouth to check in to the hotel and drop off our bags. Wanting to make the most of the remaining daylight, the group headed off to Budleigh Salterton and the Otter Estuary Nature Reserve for a walk up along the river.

This compact estuary offers wonderful views of a small area of saltmarsh, freshwater marshland and of course the river itself. From the car park we saw our first birds; two Redshank and a wonderfully confident Curlew stood in the Glasswort. As we walked up the path we stood to look at a small flock of Dark-bellied Brent Geese feeding in the field next to the cricket club with both Redwing and Fieldfare present too. Two Grey Herons were hunting in the long grass at the back.

Half way up we stopped at the small hide to view both the river and the freshwater pools on the opposite side. Plenty of duck were on the pools including Teal, Wigeon, Shoveler and a couple of Shelduck but the highlight was a female Stonechat which was probing around in some mud adjacent to the reeds. On the river we saw three Little Grebes diving for food and a gathering of gulls including Herring and Black-headed Gull. We also saw a rather bullish Great Black-backed Gull which was chasing juvenile Herring Gulls – clearly testing to see if any were weak enough to predate.

Further up the river we came across a couple of Canada Geese and two beautiful chestnut-headed Goosander (females) which were perched on a dead stump floating in the water. Once we reached the bridge we scanned the neighbouring fields to see an enormous flock of winter thrushes; maybe 500+ Redwing/Fieldfare feeding in the grass, most likely displaced to the coast following the harsh cold weather of yesterday. We were also fortunate to spot a Green Sandpiper which then flew off out of view. As we made our way back down the path to the car

park, our best bird was a Goldcrest which popped up in a tree right in front of us, only for a few moments before moving on – such a sweet little bird.

We finished our day with a short walk along the pebbled beach to scan the sea; a few gulls and the odd Cormorant were spotted in the spectacular crimson sky which hung over the bay and was truly stunning. Later, after settling in at the hotel, we met for dinner and to complete the checklist for our half day. A cracking start and we all headed to our rooms in anticipation for the days to come.

Day 2

Saturday 2nd February

This morning we started the day heading up on to the East Devon Heaths to explore the very snow-covered hills. A very picturesque walk through the heather and gorse produced a few close encounters including some lovely Greenfinch and many Redwing and Fieldfare flying over our heads but no Dartford Warbler on this occasion. Walking back along a woodland plantation edge we managed to spot Coal Tit, Blue Tit and two Siskin which were busily feeding on the Birch catkins. A Great Spotted Woodpecker and Raven were heard but not seen.

We moved off the heath and headed over to the other side of the estuary towards Labrador Bay to search for the ever-special Cirl Bunting. A brief walk around some of the stubble fields resulted in finding a flock of approximately 12 birds, mostly female, sat in amongst a few Chaffinch. We spent the next 30 minutes enjoying spectacularly close views both by eye and through telescopes. The odd Dunnock and Robin also made an appearance too, as did a Kestrel which briefly hovered over the back fields. And as we walked back a surprise Skylark took to the air in full song – a reminder that spring is on its way.

Next we stopped for lunch at a wonderful pub overlooking the River Teign which is filled with birds that you can watch as you dine by a roaring fire. There were lots of highlights, including our delicious food, but bird-wise it was a group of five Red-breasted Merganser which swam right in front of the window as did a couple of Mute Swans and some Shelduck. We also got close views of a Greenshank and Redshank spotted walking along the shore, as was a lone Common Sandpiper, searching the seaweed for a meal.

Finally, the afternoon was spent exploring Dawlish Warren which sits at the mouth of the River Exe opposite Exmouth. We started off with a brief scan of the sea which produced many Great Crested Grebe including one raft of 12 birds but unfortunately no divers or Gannets were seen. Moving inland towards Greenland Lake we spotted Little Grebe, Shoveler and had a brief view of a Water Rail which bolted between the reeds and was later seen a second time while we were walking around the back of the lake. From Warren Point we were able to look into the Bight at the evening's hide tide roost. There were lots of waders including Sanderling, Turnstone, Redshank, Oystercatcher, Dunlin and Curlew and several other species including Shelduck, Brent Geese and lots of Gulls.

Walking back to car park we were blessed with a glorious sunset over the Haldon Hills as we strolled along the beach. Back at the hotel we had a short break before meeting in the hotel dining room for dinner. After running through our checklist of birds for the day we all retired to our rooms for a well-deserved rest.

Day 3

Sunday 3rd February

First stop this morning was Exmouth Seafront, where we caught up with the early morning bird commute; Herring, Black Headed and Great Black-backed gulls all on the move between sea and estuary via the river mouth. A couple of Turnstone kept close company as they searched around the empty fish crates but the majority of the birds were seen further out. Both Cormorant and Shag were seen diving for fish in the changing tide whilst the waders took advantage of the undisturbed shores of The Warren; Oystercatchers, Curlew and Redshank were all picked out. Scanning along the sandy banks of Pole Sand and Bull Bank revealed more Gulls, hundreds of Oystercatchers and some distant Brent Geese.

Returning to our vehicle, we headed further inland to visit the hide at Bowling Green Marsh near Topsham. A very frosty morning meant the only open piece of open water on the reserve was in the far left corner where many of the birds had gathered. A large flock of Wigeon were joined by small groups of Gadwall, Tufted Duck, Pintail, Shoveler and a lone Pochard. The only other birds present were the odd Redshank and a handful of Lapwing which hung together in a small group at the centre of the ice. A small flurry of activity occurred when two Foxes, male and female, walked onto the back of the reserve and proceeded to chill out in the sun for the next twenty minutes or so.

Leaving the hide we took a few minutes to enjoy all the small passerines taking advantage of the feeders; Blue Tits, Great Tits, Chaffinch, Dunnock and a small party of House Sparrow. Our focus then turned towards the estuary view point and scanning the adjacent fields which resulted in a number of Common Snipe seen feeding in amongst Lapwing and one Water Pipit feeding adjacent to a muddy pool. Subsequently, from the view point we picked up lots of Grey Plover, Redshank, a lone Greenshank and our first good views of Dunlin and Avocet. Returning past the field one again, scanning the fields a second time proved to be very worthwhile as we were treated to not one but three Water Rail busily feeding along the back fence in the tall grass. Viewing was frustrating at first but with a bit of patience, two of the birds walked into shorter grass giving everyone excellent views.

Finally, we walked along the Goat Walk and up towards Topsham Quay adding Red-Breasted Merganser, a load more Avocet and a few Black-tailed Godwit to our list, but the obvious highlight was a Kingfisher which sat on one of the boats allowing us to spend several minutes looking at it through the scope. After a brief comfort stop we headed back to the minibus and on to our lunchtime stop at Darts Farm where we enjoyed a choice of great food and drinks to top up the energy levels before heading off to explore the farm. Our first stop was to scan the mixed crop fields which were particularly busy today. A number of birds were seen feeding on winter stubble including Skylark, Song Thrush, Redwing, Yellowhammer, Linnet and Reed Bunting.

When then moved down towards the hide to look over the wetland area which produced a large flock of Black-tailed Godwit, Wigeon, Curlew, Shoveler and a couple of Shelduck. Smaller birds included both Meadow Pipit and Water Pipit which fed close together allowing good comparison views of what can be a challenging bird. Two Stonechat were also seen feeding on the Bullrush but the highlight for many were our best views of a Water Rail which was feeding regularly amongst some Moorhen only five metres or so from the hide.

Our penultimate stop of the day was at the view point down at Cockwood where we'd hoped to pick up some divers and/or Goldeneye but neither was seen. However, great views of Red-breasted Merganser and Great

Crested Grebe were some consolation, as was a Slavonian Grebe spotted at some distance. Despite a second stop at Starcross we couldn't obtain better or closer views on this occasion. Our final stop of the day was a short walk along Exminster Marshes towards Turf lookout. Scanning the fields of the marsh, a thousand Wigeon gathered together made for quite a sight and a Marsh Harrier with its creamy head sitting on the field towards the back was an added bonus.

Walking along the tow path we came across the abandoned lunch of an Otter; an enormous Carp that had been hauled out the water and partially devoured. Once at Turf lookout, we absorbed our last views of the estuary whilst connecting with a large flock of Golden Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, more Grey Plover, Ringed Plover and some Knot which were mixed in with the many thousands of Dunlin feeding on the mud. A great last flurry of waders to end the trip. Making our way back along the tow path, there was just enough light to spot one more bird, a single Cattle Egret walking between the grazing cattle on the marsh, and for a large flock of Golden Plover to fly over our heads on their way to feed on neighbouring fields – a great way to finish a brilliant few days.

As we made our way to the train station, we all mused on the highlights of our shared Devon experience and jested about our favourite moments/bird of the trip. It was clear the group had many. We said fond farewells and thanks were given to everyone for what had been a thoroughly enjoyable tour for all with the bonus of glorious sunshine. Until the next time!

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Species Lists

Birds (H - heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February		
			1	2	3
1	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓		✓
2	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>			✓
3	Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>	3		✓
4	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>	20	✓	✓
5	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>		✓	✓
6	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	✓	✓
7	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>			✓
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	✓	✓	✓
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓
10	Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓
11	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓
12	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓		✓
13	Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>			✓
14	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>			✓
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓
16	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	2		
17	Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	5	✓	✓
18	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>		✓	✓
19	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>			✓
20	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓		✓
21	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>		✓	✓
22	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>			✓
23	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓
25	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>			✓
26	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓	✓
27	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>			✓
28	Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>		1	✓
29	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	✓	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓
31	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>		✓	✓
32	Pied Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>			✓
33	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓
34	European Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			✓
35	Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>			✓
36	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			✓
37	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>			✓
38	Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			✓
39	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>			✓
40	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓	✓
41	Spotted Redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>			
42	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	✓	✓	✓
43	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓	✓
44	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	1		
45	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1	
46	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		✓	✓
47	Red Knot	<i>Calidris canutus</i>			✓

	Common name	Scientific name	February		
			1	2	3
48	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>		✓	✓
49	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>		✓	✓
50	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓
51	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus canus</i>			✓
52	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓		✓
53	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓
54	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>		✓	✓
55	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓	✓
56	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓
57	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>			✓
58	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>			✓
59	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		H	✓
60	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	H		
61	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	
62	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓
63	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓
64	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>		✓	✓
65	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓
66	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		H	
67	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓
68	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓
69	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓
70	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓	✓
71	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓
72	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓
73	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓	H	
74	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓
75	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
76	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓
77	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓
78	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓
79	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓
80	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓
81	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>	✓		✓
82	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓
83	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓
84	Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>		✓	✓
85	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓
86	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>			✓
87	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓
88	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓
89	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓
90	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓
91	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>			✓
92	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			H
93	Cirl Bunting	<i>Emberiza cirlus</i>		12+	
94	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			✓